

Summary of Most Recent Evaluation Findings and Issues

The Interim Progress and Early Impact Report was produced in July 2001. Some of the key findings are outlined below. **The National Advisory Group is asked to consider the current development needs of Learning Partnerships and in particular identify a response to the issues and recommendations outlined on pages 4 and 5.**

Key Characteristics

- Membership of Learning Partnerships is increasingly inclusive, though achieving 'wider inclusiveness by reaching out and involving partners at the grass roots level' is proving to be a more difficult and longer-term exercise;
- The aims and objectives for most Learning Partnerships relate to increasing attainment, improving participation, addressing barriers to learning (IAG and access in particular) and addressing quality and standards in provision.
- The most common roles that Learning Partnerships have identified for themselves relate to:
 - bringing coherence to provision;
 - informing and influencing the LSC and other key funders;
 - seeking to understand and articulate the voice of the learner.

What are they doing?

- The majority of Learning Partnership activity has been focused on partnership development and collaborative activity, including for example:
 - Partnership development: accessing funds, partnership cohesion, communications and working;
 - mapping basic skills needs & provision;
 - developing mechanisms for consulting with learners;
 - pooling data/sharing intelligence across stakeholders;
 - supporting Ufl and ICT Centre developments;
 - widening participation project activities.
- A number of partnerships (just over half of the 20 Case Study Partnerships) have been taking forward more strategic actions and activities and there is evidence that others are now starting to turn their thoughts in this direction.
- Some Case Study partnerships are also taking proactive action to influence and challenge the way that partners work and plan together. Whilst this activity is not yet always reaching all partners or staff within partner organisations, there is evidence of networking activity being undertaken by Learning Partnerships in order to include, inform and influence partner and, in some cases, stakeholders.

Where are they now?

“Progress has been made on collaboration and inclusiveness, with the focus now turning to how to take forward the strategic agenda – entering a more advanced stage of development, where clearer and more quantifiable impact and added value needs to be evidenced”

- Compared to six months ago, Partnerships have generally ***developed greater clarity in relation to understanding the (potential) ‘role and purpose’*** of the Partnership itself. The arrival of the LSC and the process of reviewing and revising Learning Plans has supported this.
- Most Learning Partnerships have started to ***develop a relationship with the local LSC***, though in the majority of cases this has not yet progressed to setting clear roles and responsibilities in the form of a protocol or concordant of agreement. However, there is evidence from some of the case studies that positive relationships are developing.

- ❖ LLSC providing funding for the Learning Partnership, either to support administration/management or for delivery of key collaborative activities;
- ❖ LLSC working through the partnership structures set up by the Learning Partnership;
- ❖ LLSC using some of the Learning Partnership’s work to inform its own agenda and activities.

- A significant proportion of the Case Studies still appear to be taking largely ***‘reactive’ rather than ‘proactive’*** approaches to operation and delivery.
- There is fairly ***wide variability in the stage of development*** reached by individual Partnerships – one of the national case studies is considered to be at an ‘advanced’ stage of development, 4 have made ‘significant progress’, around half have moved beyond the early development phase; four are classed as ‘early developers’. The latter have struggled from the start to develop a clear understanding of role and some appear to have taken a step backwards as a result of the loss of the TEC as the main facilitator and driver.
- There are ***clear signs that a more strategic agenda*** for Learning Partnerships, focused on the quality and coherence of planning and delivery, is ***starting to emerge***.
- The activities of Learning Partnerships are now starting to have some early ***impact, most often on the partner organisations*** themselves. There are also a few examples of ***impact on strategic activity and decision making***. It is too early to expect to see any significant impact on the learners and employers themselves, though a few small examples are cited in the Case Studies.

Impact on Partner Organisations:

“The planning process for one Partnership influenced provider’s own plans and providers who tailored their plans to meet commitment to a shared plan”

“[The Partnership] has enabled collaboration between providers that had previously competed for students, due to the way funding regimes worked”;

“The new structure has helped the partnership and the partners work more effectively together. The Executive is now able to have more focused meetings that are less likely to be dominated by personal interests. Executive members seem to see themselves more as partners rather than representatives of their own organisations.”;

“FE colleges are now sharing participation data, in order to address Partnership issues across the area”.

Impact on Strategic Activity

“We have completed a review of gaps and duplication in provision and have developed an action plan that we are now taking forward in Partnership”.

“A joint tracking system for 14-19 year olds has been implemented, resulting in increased knowledge of all partners – we are using this to identify joint action for progression of the post-16 group”

“We now have a joint marketing approach to learners throughout the County”

“We are sharing the load of Partnership work across the Local Authorities, one taking responsibility for hosting the Learning Partnership and the other the Connexions partnership”

- There is also evidence from some Learning Partnerships that ***added value*** is being achieved in relation to partnership working and strategic direction:

- ❖ Partnership planning processes are influencing provider’s own plans;
- ❖ Strategic bidding activities and approaches across previously competitive partners;
- ❖ The local LSC is using/plans to use the Learning Partnership structure as a consultative mechanism on key issues;
- ❖ A review of gaps and duplication has been completed and is being used to develop a strategic and collaborative action plan;
- ❖ Tracking systems and collation of intelligence across partners are now being used to identify joint action for progression;
- ❖ The Voluntary sector now has access to funding that it did not have before;

- ❖ Facilitation of training providers and voluntary sector networks is helping the partnership to engage and involve these sectors more coherently.

What Issues are Learning Partnerships facing?

- Key factors to be aware of include:
 - real difficulties associated with engaging some key sectors;
 - competitive tensions, power playing and self-interest;
 - taking a reactive rather than proactive stance;
 - tendency focus on “activities and actions” – this is often ‘easier’;
 - real engagement and involvement of all partners at ‘grass roots’ level;
 - time and resource involved in developing effective communication and coherence.

- Other issues that are influencing Partnerships’ progression include:
 - **A pressure to demonstrate Impact** - a positive influence on Partnerships in that it has encouraged them to focus on the issue of demonstrating their impact. However, some partners feel that ‘the national agencies and ministers’ hold *unrealistic expectations and demonstrate poor understanding of the nature of partnership development, including issues such as resource, clarity of purpose, overcoming “the competition that has existing for 18 years”, and ensuring structures are in place.*
 - **Building Up Expectations** – In some cases Partnership Managers and some board members/Chairs are very good at *“talking up the partnership”*. This is necessary to *encourage engagement*, but in reality, its clear that progress is still to be made on the “real partnership values” of sharing, focusing on the needs of learners and employers, and considering issues from a partnership rather than institutional perspective.
 - **Waiting for the LSC** - There were some partners we spoke to who still indicated a *‘reactive – “lets wait and see what the LSC comes up with”* approach’, rather than one that is more *‘proactive –“lets tell the LSC how we think we can/should work with them”*.’
 - **Time and Resource** - This continues to be a major constraint for Learning Partnerships to make significant progress.
 - **Who Delivers the Projects?** – Partners or Partnership? The latter proves to be more effective for some partnerships that cite this a key to their success – *“if we (the Partnership administration) tried to manage and deliver all these activities we would need some kind of superstructure...this is not what we believe a true Partnership should be”*. However, in some examples where it is the ‘partners’ taking forward the collaborative project, it is less obvious that the Partnership itself is adding value and some see them as partner delivered projects.
 - **Attitudes** - The issues of competitiveness, self-interest, and power playing were cited by a number of the partners in from the national case studies and in the regional evaluation report.

Recommendations

Encouragement and Support

1. Undertake some targeted work with those Learning Partnerships that still appear to be 'early developers', to help them overcome the barriers they still face. In particular, encourage them to focus on 'a few' key areas of potential impact and added value, rather than 'the whole agenda'.
2. Use this and the regional evaluation reports to provide some "positive press" for Learning Partnerships.
3. The national LSC to publicise its support and encouragement for the role of Learning Partnerships. The LSC and other national partners to demonstrate their commitment to Learning Partnerships, by for example, including evidence of partnership working as a criteria for funding and support.
4. Temper the 'high expectations' placed on Partnerships with some recognition of the real achievements made and the constraints being faced.
5. Continue to provide a clear national focus for Learning Partnerships on a small number of key priority areas, such as Basic Skills, National Learning Targets, Learner Fora, ICT.

More Focus on Impact

6. Encourage Learning Partnerships to focus on one or two key agendas/actions. This enables them to 'get on with things'. As part of this, it is important for stakeholders to stress and recognise that the Guidance for Learning Partnerships is an outline of areas they might have a role, and not of all the things they should be doing.
7. Encourage Learning Partnerships to be more outward-facing. Start to place more emphasis on the need to engage partner organisations and not just partner members' in the partnership process. Emphasise that inclusiveness is more than just membership on the Partnership Board.
8. Encourage and ensure that the 'demonstration projects' result in real and quantifiable evidence of impact and added value, on learners, employers, strategic decisions, partner working and planning and influencing/challenging stakeholders.
9. Complement the guidance provided to local LSCs and Learning Partnerships by producing and publicising good practice examples, including those that show how Learning Partnerships and local LSC relationships are developing in practice and Partnerships that are starting to address the inclusiveness agenda.

Management Information

10. Improve the collection of intelligence about the Learning Partnership Fund, at Learning Partnership, Government Office and National Level. To include information about:
 - funding allocated and intended outputs and outcomes;
 - actual spend;
 - matched funding;
 - outcomes achieved;
 - impact and added value.